

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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Do not be appalled by this slight epic. Always bear in mind that there is a great deal of bad in the worst of us—and a great deal in the best of us. This, I trust, should be of some solace.

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AFTER Rocky Luca's parents left, I phoned the bank to make certain that their two thousand dollar check was good and then I drove down to the Sixth Precinct Station.

More than a dozen teen agers were lounging in the big room, trying to look bored, and about three-fourths of them wore bright satin jackets with a blazing insignia and the lettering "Red Falcons" on the back.

Sergeant Peters stopped talking to the desk sergeant and looked me over coldly. "So they got you for a lawyer, Regan? Now I know the kid's guilty."

"Don't brood about it," I said. "Where's Luca?"

"In a cell upstairs." Peters smiled tightly. "How did the old folks get the money to hire a shyster like you? Fork up their life's savings?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I once read that it takes the average lawyer seven years out of law school before he earns a decent living. And here you are with your diploma only three years dry and

you're driving a white Cadillac."

"What have you got on Rocky?" I asked impatiently. "His parents were too busy crying to make much sense."

Peters took his elbow off the sergeant's desk. "This morning, just after midnight, Alex Morgan, the owner of a tobacco store on Eighty-second, was robbed and stabbed to death in the small apartment behind his shop. We got an eye-witness who saw Rocky leave



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the place at that time this A.M."

I rubbed an ear. "Naturally the moon was bright and he has 20-20 vision?"

Peter smiled. "There's a big light at the head of the alley."

I shrugged. "So somebody saw him leave Morgan's place. That might prove he was there, but it's still a long way from proving he's guilty of murder."

Peters apparently was enjoying himself. "Rocky's switch knife was found under Morgan's body."

"And you're positive it's his knife?"

Peters grinned. "Three lovely initials. And his parents did us the favor of identifying it."

I grimaced and indicated the

Red Falcons. "If you're so sure Rocky's your boy, why did you go through the trouble of rounding up all these other punks?"

"The janitor didn't know Rocky personally. He just saw that he was wearing a Red Falcon jacket, but when he looked the gang over he remembered the face for us."

I smiled. "The janitor?"

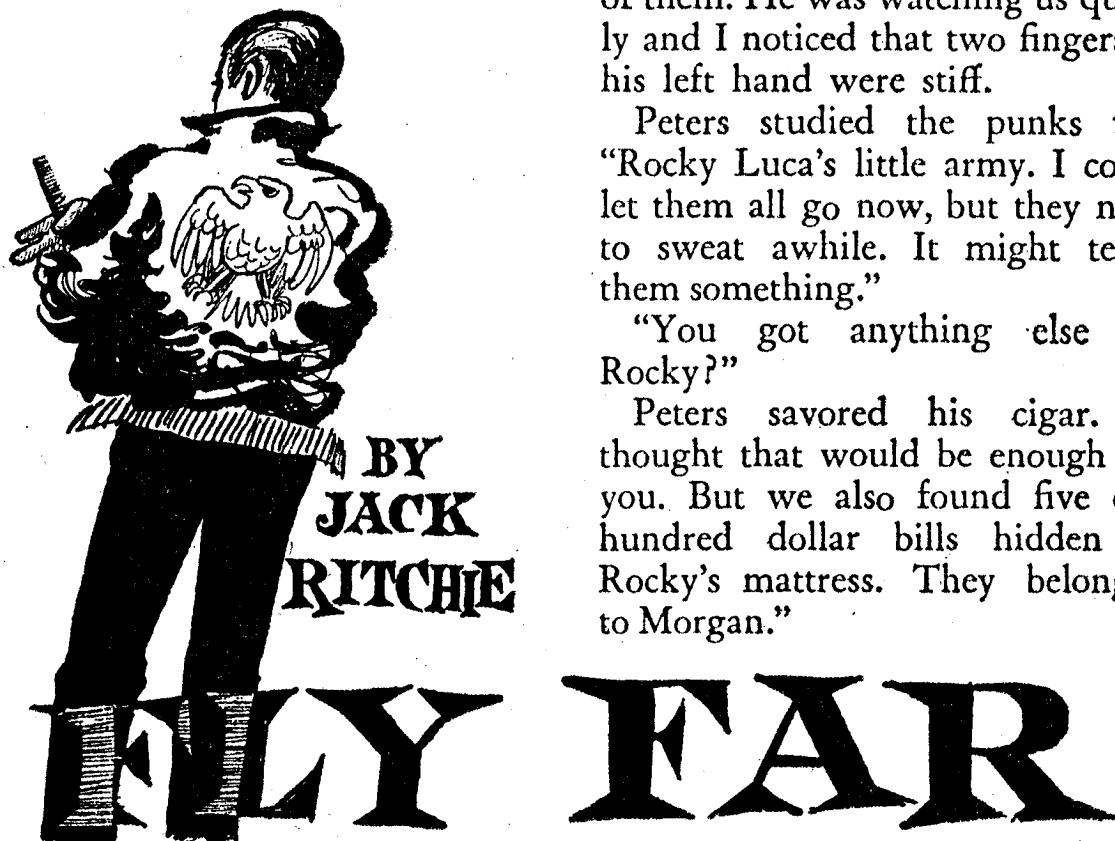
Peters was irritated at having revealed his eyewitness. "The janitor of the building across the street," he said reluctantly.

I let my eyes go over the Falcons again. They all had the same mixture of sullenness and superiority on their faces and they knew all the answers. They were as alike as peas in a pod, except maybe for one of them. He was watching us quietly and I noticed that two fingers of his left hand were stiff.

Peters studied the punks too. "Rocky Luca's little army. I could let them all go now, but they need to sweat awhile. It might teach them something."

"You got anything else on Rocky?"

Peters savored his cigar. "I thought that would be enough for you. But we also found five one hundred dollar bills hidden in Rocky's mattress. They belonged to Morgan."



"I suppose his signature was on everyone of them?"

"Just about as good as that. We came across a type-written list of the bill numbers in Morgan's desk."

I almost sighed. "What does Rocky say about all this?"

"You got yourself a good client. He just hollers for his lawyer. He won't say a thing except that he didn't do it."

"All right," I said, "I'd like to see him now. And alone."

Rocky Luca was eighteen, close to six feet tall, and weighed about one ninety. He waited until the cell door was locked and the guard walked away. "You my lawyer? Regan?"

I nodded.

"I sent my folks to you. How much did they pay?"

"Two thousand." I could have added, "So far," but there was no point in bringing that up now.

He scowled. "You got the money. Now work for it."

"As soon as you tell me your story."

He was quiet half a minute and I knew he was putting the words he was going to use in order.

"Look," I said. "I don't care whether you killed Morgan or not. But I'd like the truth. It's easier for me to work that way."

His voice was angry and desperate. "I didn't kill him. It was a frame-up."

"Sure," I said. "A frame. You're so important that somebody would

go through all the trouble of framing you."

He flushed a little. "I'm big enough."

"In the minor leagues. Just tell me what happened."

He glared at me. "There isn't much to tell. Morgan gave me the word to come to his place after midnight."

"What for?"

"He didn't say."

"A deal of some kind?"

Rocky didn't look at me. "How would I know? I never got to talk to him."

"Don't get coy. You're not the type who goes to see the owner of a tobacco store at that time of night just for the conversation."

Rocky took his time before he decided to give me the information. "Morgan was pushing junk in the neighborhood. I thought he wanted to let me in on the deal."

"Go on," I said.

"The store was dark, but there was a light in the back. The door was open a little, so after I knocked and got no answer, I gave it a push and walked in." Rocky licked his lips. "Morgan was on the floor as dead as they come."

"Did you touch him?"

"No. He was blood all over."

"Did you take the five hundred?"

Rocky took a deep breath. "Yeah."

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He brooded a moment. "It was

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just laying there on the table. Morgan wasn't going to spend it."

I smiled. "You got real brains. Why didn't you take your knife along too?"

"I didn't see it. They tell me it was under the body." He looked up. "I lost the knife more than a week ago."

"Of course," I said dryly. "When you found Morgan, why didn't you call the police?"

That was a dirty word to him. "Mister, I don't have nothing to do with the police."

Except for now. I thought. "There's an eyewitness. Somebody who saw you leave the place."

"Yeah. They told me."

I lit a cigarette. "You're in deep."

This time when he looked at me he could have been on his knees. "You got to get me off. I tell you I was framed."

"That's something to work on."

"Then you believe me?"

"No." I puffed the cigarette. "Who'd want to frame a punk like you?"

"I can't figure it."

"What about those pasty-faced monsters you call the Red Falcons? Any one of them got the brains and a reason for putting you here?"

Rocky shrugged. "They get lippy once in awhile and I have to lean on them. But they got no grudge against me that I know of."

"When did Morgan phone you?"

"I don't know. I just got the message."

"Wait a minute," I said. "You got the message? You didn't talk to him yourself?"

"No. Freddie must have got the call. Anyway, he passed the word to me."

"Who's Freddie?"

"One of the Falcons. He's got two stiff fingers."

I could see an opening, a light, and I smiled. "Why keep him around? With that hand he can't be much good in a rumble."

Rocky rasied his shoulders. "He paid me twenty-five bucks. So I said what the hell, and let him buy himself a jacket."

I folded my arms and leaned against the cell wall. "Tell me about him, Rocky."

He grimaced. "One of them brainy types. Graduated from high school when he was sixteen, but I guess his family didn't have the money to send him to college, so he's been hanging around the last couple of years." Rocky searched his memory. "He was pretty good at the piano once. Used to play in the assembly hall at school. Long hair stuff and we all had to listen."

"With those two stiff fingers?"

"That was before he got them."

"How did it happen?"

"In some accident, I guess. I don't know." Rocky rubbed his jaw. "His brother used to play the piano too and even got some kind of a scholarship."

"Used to?"

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he took too much. It killed him."

I thought about Freddie and his brother for a minute and then smiled. "Those two stiff fingers: You gave them to Freddie."

Rocky's mouth dropped slightly. He started shaking his head. "I didn't have a thing . . ."

"Shut up," I said. "That's the way we tell it. You were responsible for those fingers."

He looked blank.

"Look," I said. "If you want to claim you were framed, we've got to have somebody to stick this with."

Rocky was getting the picture, but it shocked him. "You'd do something like that?" he asked.

"You want to get off, don't you?"

"Yeah." His face was uncertain. "But that way?"

"It's the only way I can think of."

Rocky worked on the idea for awhile and then he sighed. "All right. If it's got to be him or me, let it be him."

I saw Sergeant Peters ten minutes later. "Rocky will answer questions now."

"But you'll be there to coach him?"

"To protect his interests."

"Okay," he said sourly. "Let's get going."

"One more thing. I want Freddie Sterling there too."

Peters frowned. "What for?"

"You'll find that out."

We were all in the interrogation room five minutes later.

Peters went over what he had on Rocky and then it was Rocky's turn to tell his story.

While he talked, I watched Freddie Sterling. He was about nineteen and his brown eyes showed none of the surprise he must have felt to be in the room.

When Rocky was through, I shifted in my chair and spoke to Peters. "This janitor who identified Rocky. Why did he happen to be standing at a window just in time to see Rocky leaving Morgan's place?"

He smiled. "He was answering the hall phone. It's right next to a window and looks down on Morgan's store."

"Who phoned the janitor at one in the morning?"

Peters eyed me warily. "It was a wrong number."

"Ah," I said.

"Ah, what?" he demanded.

"How convenient that the janitor was called to the phone at precisely that time. And what about the five hundred dollars you found in Rocky's room? He admits taking it. But don't you think that it's a little peculiar that Morgan would bother to type a list of the serial numbers on those bills? They were just hundreds. Who would go through the trouble to do something like that these days? Especially Morgan." I smiled. "By the way, you didn't tell me that Morgan was a dope peddler. Or didn't you know?"

He flushed slightly. "We knew. But I didn't think it had anything to do with this case."

"But it has." I went on. "And the knife. So conveniently left under the body and so readily identifiable."

"So what about it?"

"Rocky's a big boy," I said. "He leads a rough life. If he killed Morgan, do you think he'd be the type who would panic and leave the knife behind?"

Peters controlled his temper. "What are you getting at?"

I shifted my attention to Freddie Sterling. "You were quite a pianist, weren't you?"

He smiled slightly. "Some people thought so."

"But those stiff fingers put an end to all that. How did it happen?"

"I fell down a fire escape."

I turned to Rocky. "I want you to tell the truth, Rocky. How did Freddie get those stiff fingers?"

Rocky could have been an actor. He spoke with just the right degree of reluctance. "About three years ago I beat him up pretty bad. That's when it happened."

I expected Freddie's face to show surprise, but there was only a flicker in his eyes. Then he smiled faintly, as though he was content for the moment merely to see what I was up to.

Peters rubbed his forehead. "So Rocky is responsible for the condition of Sterling's hand. What's that

got to do with the trouble Rocky's in now?"

I spoke to Freddie. "You had a brother, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"He had a great talent, didn't he? He might have become a great pianist?"

"Yes."

"But he died of an overdose of narcotics?"

Freddie nodded slowly.

"Who do you suppose was his supplier?"

"I wouldn't know."

"It was Morgan," I said softly. "And you did know." I turned back to Peters. "Rocky was framed. It was a neat thing and Freddie here is the boy who did the fitting."

Peters seemed about to snort.

"The motive is there." I said. "Freddie hated Morgan because he supplied the dope that killed his brother. And he hated Rocky because of what he did to his fingers."

Peters wasn't buying, but he was listening.

"Freddie came to Rocky and told him that Morgan wanted to see him at one in the morning. Rocky fell for that. He knew what business Morgan was really in and he wanted to be a part of it."

"Freddie killed Morgan, probably a half an hour before Rocky was due to show up. He used Rocky's knife, the one Rocky thought he had lost a week before. And when Morgan was dead, Freddie went through his wallet and discovered

the five hundred dollars. He typed out the serial numbers and left them where the police would be sure to find them. Then he put the money in plain sight. On the table where Rocky couldn't miss it."

Peters was thoughtful. "How could he be sure that Rocky would take the dough?"

"He couldn't," I said. "But it was a spur of the moment thing and it had a fifty-fifty chance of working. But that wasn't too important. He already had the knife planted under Morgan and the next thing he did was to arrange for the janitor to see Rocky coming out of Morgan's place."

Peters was skeptical. "How could he do that?"

"He waited in the neighborhood until he saw Rocky turn into the alley next to Morgan's store. Then he hurried to a phone—maybe an outdoor booth or at a drugstore—and phoned the janitor's number. He kept him there, at the hall phone, long enough so that he would see Rocky coming out of Morgan's living quarters."

Peters slowly rubbed his jaw and studied Freddie.

I met Freddie's eyes and I found in them something mocking, something startling, and I realized suddenly with primitive instinct that I hadn't been setting up a pigeon.

I was telling exactly what had happened!

But Freddie smiled. "You're a smart lawyer, mister. but there are

two things you ought to know. First of all my brother died from taking dope, but Morgan wasn't the one who gave it to him. Morgan moved into the neighborhood a year ago. My brother's been dead for over five."

The smile got a little wider and he held up the hand with the stiff fingers. "I fell down a fire escape during a drill at school. If I think about it, I can give you the names of about thirty students and three or four teachers who saw it happen." He leaned back in his chair. "So you see, Mr. Lawyer, I don't have a thing against Rocky or Morgan."

There was a moment's silence and then Peters chuckled. "You got yourself hung up a tree that time, Regan."

Freddie got up. "Is it all right if I leave now, Sergeant?"

When he was gone and Peters took Rocky back to the cell, I remained in my chair and smoked a slow cigarette. Yes. Freddie had killed Morgan and framed Rocky. I was absolutely positive of that. And if I worked long enough and hard enough, I thought I could prove it. And for once I would be on the side of the angels.

When I walked down the steps of the police station, Freddie was waiting at my Cadillac.

"Nice long car you've got here," he said.

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the street in groups of threes and fours and they weren't going to be hurried out of the neighborhood. It was their way of proving that they weren't afraid of the police.

"The Red Falcons," I said. "So original. Why not the Crimson Peregrines or the Magenta Tiercels?"

He smiled. "Don't blame me. I didn't make the name up." He studied them. "They're growing out of their leather jackets. They'll be wearing suits soon."

"You killed Morgan, Freddie," I said. "I lost a round in there, but I'll pin it on you some way."

"Maybe." He took his time lighting a cigarette. "Rocky's folks paid you two thousand bucks?"

"You know a lot for a punk."

The eyes flashed, but he spoke softly. "Now all they got left in their bank account is \$36.47. No house to mortgage for more lawyer money. No nothing, but \$36.47. Think about that, Mr. Lawyer."

I did and I had to ask, "How do you know how much they've got?"

"I've got ways of finding out things." His eyes indicated the Red Falcons across the street.

"Most of them will die in jail," I said irritably. "Or in pool room brawls, or trying to rob delicatessens."

Freddie's voice was still soft. "They would have. But not now."

Then he smiled faintly. "Rocky had the muscles and that means a lot when you're dealing with kids

who wear jackets. But the kids grow up and then it takes something else to lead them and lead them right."

And that was it! That was Freddie's motive. I stared at him. "You think you can take over? Just like that?"

"Not just like that, mister," Freddie said. "I've been working on it and the shoes will fit. There's a couple of million bucks across the street, mister. If the material is handled right."

His eyes came back to me. "All you got to shoot for is \$36.47. That chicken feed against the future."

Our eyes met and held.

"All right," I said finally. "What about the future?"

The two stiff fingers gestured slightly toward the Red Falcons. "In a couple of years I can make something big out of them. An organization can alway use a smart lawyer and the pay will be good."

The nineteen-year-old man used my first name. "Ed," he asked softly, "what's going to happen to Rocky?"

I found myself wetting my lips. "He'll get convicted."

"You'll see to that, Ed?"

"Yes. I'll see to that."

And then Freddie Sterling crossed the street and joined the Red Falcons.

It didn't quite have the order of a parade, but Freddie walked in the lead and they fell in behind him.